

“Big Idea” Recommendations from the Early Learning Council to the Washington Learns Steering Committee

The Early Learning Council proposes a radical shift in how we think about education—from one that focuses first on institutions or systems to one focused on the needs and opportunities of learners. Birth through ten years would be the “learning to learn” phase, the period when fundamental learning structures are developed in the human brain, and basic emotional and relationship skills are mastered. The second phase would encompass life-long learning starting at age eleven.

Amazing new research on brain development, along with research about the high rate of returns that accrue from investing in high quality early learning, put us in a great position to redesign the way we supports children and families during the “learning to learn years.”

Ten years from now, Washington State will be world-renowned for its support of young children and families. We will have the very best materials, including a web site translated into multiple languages, fed by the latest and best research from our universities that will allow new parents, grandparents, family, friends, and neighbors to find great support their role in the first days, months and years of a child’s life.

Full-time, high quality, economically integrated early care and learning experiences will be available families regardless of their ability to pay. Services will be provided free or at very low cost for families needing the most support; services will be fee-based for other families. Parental involvement will be a hallmark so that parents will be even more effective as their child’s first teacher. Services for family, friend and neighbor caregivers will be widely available in multiple languages, and in comfortable, culturally relevant settings.

By the time children are four years old, they will be enrolled in (voluntary) taxpayer supported, full day, full year early learning opportunities. Because these schools will be year round and full day, there will be time for play, music, art, and drama as well as the beginnings of other skills like reading, math, languages, keyboarding, and discovery-based science.

Big Idea #1

In collaboration with the Thrive by Five Partnership, the state will provide leadership to help parents, families, early learning providers, schools, communities and opinion leaders understand the importance of the first ten years as the “learning to learn” phase—and to begin refocusing and changing the landscape of education for children through age ten.

This will include steps to support parents, improve safety, health, and early learning outcomes for children in existing early learning settings, and increase integration among early learning programs including schools.

Parents: Their Child’s First and Best Teachers—when they want and need it, information and supports need to be readily available. Parent involvement will be the hallmark of early learning services.

- Parenting information (no wrong door) and supports will be available to parents including intensive supports for families struggling due to poverty or other risk factors.
- Information about the licensing process, regulatory history, monitoring reports, and quality ratings will be transparent and readily available to parents through the internet and toll-free lines. Opportunities will be provided for parental input during child care and early learning program re-licensing, program reviews and other means.
- When parents choose family, friend and neighbor care for their child, information and appropriate supports will be available to these caregivers.
- Parent and family engagement is the foundation upon which school success is built; and seamless connections between schools and other care and learning providers are critical. Moving toward a high quality “learning to learn” system requires: partnerships characterized by mutual respect and trust; parents and families who are empowered to help children succeed in school; schools and providers who help smooth transitions; new attitudes that are reflected in the beliefs and actions of providers and educators; resource sharing; wider community collaborations that result in locally appropriate solutions; and child outcome and program assessment data that is used to continuously improve services.

Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS): Clear steps, supports and incentives are needed to increase the quality of services provided by existing early learning and school-age programs. Program ratings will provide parents and communities with information about the type and quality of programs available in their communities. The ultimate intent is to improve early learning outcomes for children.

- QRIS will include five levels starting with compliance with licensing (1) and program accreditation as the highest level (5) and will focus on improved quality in five categories: professional development, learning and curriculum based on what children need to know and be able to do when they enter kindergarten (linked to the redesigned benchmarks), parent and community partnerships, management practices and program assessment.

- Documentation and self-assessment will be used to determine QRIS levels 1 and 2. This information will be supplemented by external quality assessment/observation for levels 3-5.

Regulatory Reform: *Regulation provides the basic foundation for QRIS and needs to be changed to increase the involvement of parents, minimize risks for children, and support early learning centers and homes in improving the health, safety and quality of their services. Regulation must be based in mutual respect among state staff, providers and parents; involve cooperation among regulatory entities; be just and consistent while allowing for professional judgment; and include both positive and negative enforcement strategies. Specific recommendations include:*

- All licensed homes and centers should be monitored at least once a year—on an unannounced basis except on-site visits associated with re-licensing. Steps such as centralizing responsibility for background checks should help ensure timely processing of background checks and free licensors to devote more of their time to monitoring.
- The Department of Early Learning will develop a plan for identification and registration of part-day preschools.
- Guidance, training, observations and the monitoring of concerns will be used to increase consistency in practice across regulatory personnel.
- The re-licensing process will include a comprehensive review of the provider including self-evaluation, monitoring, input from parents, and review of the provider's file with supervisor input.
- A clear system of progressive enforcement is needed. Support providers in improving the quality of their services through QRIS and other means. Based on weighted regulations (depending on their importance to the health, safety, development, and well-being of children) develop thresholds for taking corrective action, e.g., fines, probation, revocation.

Big Idea #2

As part of understanding “learning to learn” differently, leadership will be provided about the need for increased public support to high quality early learning services.

A delivery system dependent largely on what parents can afford to pay results in early learning programs that frequently lack the resources necessary to provide high quality services including workforce education, training and compensation. It also results in economic discrimination as a barrier to high quality early learning.

- Costs associated with improved quality will be supported through means-based scholarships for low and moderate-income families that are worth more in higher quality early learning services (QRIS).
- As a primary strategy for supporting improved quality in early learning programs, the state's purpose and intention to establish a statewide QRIS linked to Tiered Reimbursement will be established in statute. Funding should be sought to implement QRIS in an array of communities across the state in FY 07-09. Implementation should include a full array of supports, bonuses, incentives and tiered reimbursement to cover the costs associated with providing higher quality services (including increased education and compensation). Budget assumptions should be on the estimates used in the Access to High Quality Early Learning Study.
- Assuming the current approach to reimbursing providers for the care of subsidized children, the state's basic reimbursement rates need to cover what providers charge their privately paying families.

Big Idea #3

Research strongly links quality in early learning to staff qualifications and compensation. Staff in the “learn to learn phase” of education need to be trained experts in the first years of human emotional and educational development and be paid commensurate with other educators with equivalent levels of education. Ongoing professional development and training will, combined with reasonable pay and benefits, create stability among staff so that children and families will have long lasting relationships with early learning providers.

- Steps need to be taken to address the issue of “learning to learn” provider/teacher preparation and credentialing. Credentialing of individuals working in early learning should be considered. In contrast to licensing, which is tied to a facility, credentials would be awarded to an individual based on his or her education, experience and other qualifications. Such credentials would be “portable” across changes in employers.
- Upgrading the professional development of early learning teachers will require increased Higher Education capacity including improved articulation between two and four year institutions and expanded availability of four year early learning degrees. Among issues that need to be addressed are making sure that credits are available for community-based training and that early education credits are transferable across institutions of higher education.

Big Idea #4

Early learning happens at the local community level—and success may well be defined differently across communities—especially when it comes to inclusion and support to each child and family’s culture and needs. Public and private solutions will be necessary to enable all children to be ready for the next step in their learning journey.

Many communities across Washington State have already initiated community collaborations that include child care and early learning and build on local community infrastructure including child care resource and referral, health and safety networks, libraries, parks, health departments, and educational service districts.

- In support of “learning to learn,” communities will be encouraged to plan for how they will support parents, other caregivers and learners during the first years of life.
- Community collaboration is a necessary part of QRIS implementation—early QRIS implementation should include identification of communities that are interested and ready to serve as early implementers.

Big Idea #5

Creating “state of the art” early learning, characterized by accessibility, transparency, accountability, and proven outcomes, requires a state of the art information system.

- To improve the health, safety, development and well-being of children in early learning programs, a state of the art information system is required to ensure efficient use of staff time; track statistics on accidents, violations, and other indications of the need for rule changes; provide clear and specific historical information for parents; make more information available to providers; provide sound linkages between licensing and QRIS; and track child outcomes for purposes of evaluation and program improvement.